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Community across a continent:
cultivating relationships in online education
Distance Education versus Traditional Education: Management Methods and
Systems

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Abstract

Online education has undoubtedly revolutionized the ways, means, and criteria for learning. With more systems for cyber communication and collaboration than ever before, online education is often touted as the second coming of Horace Mann's notion of "the great equalizer" in education. However, one critical piece of face-to-face education, the ability to build and cultivate interpersonal relationships and communities, is severely strained, and often nonexistent, in the realm of online learning. As more and more research suggests the importance of community to students' academic success at all levels of the educational system, what are the implications for our online students if this factor is missing? In this paper, the author draws upon her experience as a traditional public school educator and as an online instructor through the Johns Hopkins University Masters of Science in Education program to discuss the importance of nurturing personal connections with online students in ways that support students' intrinsic needs for community and increase participation, interaction, and academic outcomes.

Keywords: online education, cyber communication, management methods and systems

Introduction

I came to online education only a year ago, after seven years spent teaching in a public secondary institution and the switch from face-to-face to online, as well as that from teaching 13-year-old students to graduate students, proved a challenge. Though I formerly prided myself upon my ability to cultivate strong relationships and communities alongside my students, teaching online seemed to be marked by its detachment and solitude. This paper arose both from a general curiosity about online pedagogy and from my own earnest desire to improve my practice. Adding further incentive for this examination was the unique setup of the Master of Science in Education online program through Johns Hopkins University where I teach, which frames the responsibilities of instructors as comprising course facilitation (60%) and relationship building (40%). Given the strong emphasis on relationships promoted by JHU, I combined my visions of excellent classroom teaching with my perceptions of the sorts of interaction that should take place in a graduate level seminar, and I quickly encountered a number of issues common to many online educators: technological malfunctioning, problems relating to access and clarity around course expectations, and - most problematic of them all - student attrition.

Indeed, student persistence is a concern in both traditional and online institutions, and with online dropout rates traditionally ranging from 30-50% (Stanford-Bowers, 2008), this phenomenon deserves the wealth of attention it has received in recent years. The degree of student involvement and interaction with peers and instructors have been shown to positively correlate with student retention (Tinto, 1975; Rovai, 2003), with one study even suggesting that the extent of student involvement in courses and the greater campus community within the first six to seven weeks significantly impacted the students' likelihood of persistence at an institution (Milem and Berger, 1997). Though these and other studies have suggested the vital link between student "fit" and persistence, faculty and administrative concerns about online education tend more toward the practical aspects of its implementation, rather than the interpersonal ones (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Thus, a paradox is created when a myopic focus on the technological components of online education obfuscates any engagement with the needs of the learners it purports to serve. Stanford-Bowers (2008) articulates this irony in describing the administrative approach to online education:

a huge investment is made in technology, but little in comparison is made in the human stock
when lack of attention to traditional course management issues such as learning styles, individual
differences of students, selection of appropriate course activities and materials, and proper

training for online faculty and students fails to consider online pedagogy and the students who are to benefit (para. 2).

This argument is evidence of a larger shift in online education, wherein learning is not “simply ‘delivered’ to a passive student,” but is instead viewed as a continual process of co-production (Uvalic-Trumbic and Daniel, n.d., p. 7). Laurillard (n.d.) shares similar sentiments as she challenges the higher education community to “redefine what counts as higher learning by moving beyond a curriculum that teaches *what is known* and to one that teaches *how one comes to know*” (p. 29). What, then, is the role of community-building in online learning as it moves from a “banking model” of education (Freire, 2000) to one of personal, institutional, and social transformation? How can we create strong communities across continents, and how will we know if our efforts have been successful? Before tackling these larger questions, a brief survey of popular conceptions of quality in online education is in order.

Online Education and Definitions of Quality

Uvalic-Trumbic and Daniel (n.d.) explain that while quality online education has traditionally implicated issues of accountability and quality improvement, such discussions should begin and end with the learner, “with the student perspective taken as the starting point of quality development across the various areas of online learning provision” (p. 3). Still, the Quality Matters Program, whose Higher Education Program Rubric is widely employed, defines quality in online learning very closely with “alignment,” or the cooperation of critical course components in ensuring students achieve stated learning goals, with little attention paid to the community aspect of online learning at all (Quality Matters, 2014). The theory of “pedagogic usability” (Kukulaska-Hulme and Shield, 2004) recognizes the interplay of academic, general, and technical usability in their contributions to the user’s experience. Undoubtedly, these factors are necessary to a successful, high-quality online educational program. However, we must also seek ways to merge theoretical markers of quality with the everyday, interpersonal practices of online teaching and learning. Laurillard (n.d.) reminds us that “[t]he interplay between theory and practice - that is, making the abstract concrete through a reflective practicum - is essential, as is the continually iterative dialogue between teacher and student” (p. 30). Thus, in addition to practical concerns of outcome-based alignment, usability, and accessibility, online educators must also strive to create and maintain a course environment that is responsive to more than the academic needs of students.

Importance of Community and Relationships in Online Education

On a semantical note, Conrad (2005) has shown that online students don't necessarily differentiate among "support," "interaction," "participation," and "community"; they are viewed as interrelated pieces that contribute to an overall sense of community, and as such, I will use such terms interchangeably (where appropriate) to suggest a comprehensive notion of community in the sections that follow.

That said, a few definitions are needed to lay the groundwork. While earlier definitions of community in cyberspace were characterized by randomness and chaos (see Rheingold, 1993), contemporary definitions of community on the Web tend to emphasize intentionality and interpersonal interaction. For instance, Lock (2007) asserts that

[a] community is not an entity or product. Rather, it is a process which is fluid in nature. A community evolves through nurturing conditions...It is a supportive and empowering environment that accommodates and is responsive to a user's actions, interactions, and reactions (p. 130).

Conrad (2005) describes the attributes of community in a similarly relational way:

The creation of community simulates for online learners the comforts of home, providing a safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, an invitation for intellectual exchange, and a gathering place for like-minded individuals who are sharing a journey that includes similar activities, purpose, and goals (p. 2).

Because of the various sorts of online interactions that occur in cyberspace at any given time, Palloff and Pratt (2005) carefully distinguish between "online communities" and online *learning* communities: "Engaging in collaborative learning and the reflective practice involved in transformative learning differentiate the online learning community" (p. 1). Given this distinction between these practices, Palloff and Pratt emphasize that online educational tools (e.g., conferencing forums, listservs, etc.) do *not* create communities; instead, it is the interaction among people that engenders learning communities. But in order for such interactions to occur, students must feel safe and comfortable, and must view their instructors and peers with a degree of trust (Lock, 2007).

Because "[c]ommunication and interaction are essential elements within learning" (Australian National Training Authority, 2002) it is no surprise that these elements must also be cultivated and encouraged in an online setting. In addition to improving educational outcomes and retention, Lock (2003) reminds us of the importance of attending to the psychological and emotional well-being of students as we simultaneously seek to enrich

their intellectual curiosity: "Attention ought to be directed to ways in which online learning environments accommodate the social and psychological needs of people who come together virtually to learn" (p. 1). Attending to these needs is no easy task, especially for the online instructor. Similarities to face-to-face teaching still exist, of course, but they are often further complicated by the nature of the medium. "Like the face-to-face instructors," writes Stanford-Bowers (2008), online instructors "must establish relationships with their students, determine their needs, and develop a teaching style which fits those needs; however, they must do so without any face-to-face contact" (para. 9).

To this end, it is perhaps instructive to remember Moore's (1980) articulation of "transactional distance," wherein distance - at least in the context of distance education - should be conceived of pedagogically and socially, rather than geographically and physically. In their mixed methods study, Tu and McIsaac (2002) looked at social presence in online courses. Defined as "a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment," social presence was shown to possess three primary dimensions within the scope of their study: social context, which included the nature of the program itself and the areas of commonalities or differences among students; online communication, which encompassed communication among peers and instructors; and interactivity, or the level and nature of activity in which learners and instructors engaged.

In Stanford-Bowers' study (2008) of student, faculty, and administrator perceptions of important factors in online student retention, a similar theme of social context emerged. However, the student respondents were the only group to mention both course design, involving the types and number of assignments in the course, and personal contact with instructors and peers (via telephone or virtual conference) as salient factors in retention of online students. Where administrators and faculty responses were comparable - and focused on issues of self-motivation, self-discipline, access to appropriate technology, and time management - they diverged from student responses in important ways that shed light upon possible "blind spots" regarding the needs and expectations of learners in online environments.

How can such "blind spots" be incorporated into online instruction? The rise of constructivism in both online and traditional educational pedagogy in recent years offers a promising way forward, as educators seek to bring together various theories and research and put them into practice (Huang, 2002). Because constructivism holds that "reflection and discussion are key activities through which knowledge is gained," online education may in fact be an ideal space to promote and explore such values, as "the asynchronous nature of

online classes allows for and encourages such reflection (Stanford-Bowers, para. 12). Though some debate has occurred around cognitive constructivism and social constructivism, and whether one is more applicable to the world of online education than the other, opportunities for both can and should be integrated into online learning, especially as they stand in contrast to positivist epistemologies.

Online Community Creation in Practice

Having briefly overviewed conceptions of community in online learning, a logical question that perhaps follows is, what does this look like in practice? Lock (2005) proposes five guidelines to promote community building in online environments: First, there needs to be an awareness among all stakeholders of the value of learning communities in order to lay a strong foundation for collaboration and interaction. Secondly, the design of the course must be intentionally structured to serve students and promote interactions. Third, we must take into consideration ways to promote “camaraderie” (Brown, 2001) and collaboration *outside* of and *beyond* the course environment. Fourth, instructors must make efforts to integrate community-building aspects throughout a course, and as such, should not simply be siloed in one course component (i.e., discussions). Finally, Lock insists that more research must be done on this topic, and asserts that online instructors are uniquely positioned to conduct formal and informal action research to better refine our collective understanding of community-building online (pp. 142-143). Though no clear, actionable strategies are provided in Lock’s analysis, they provide a starting point from which a practical dialogue may take root.

Though we as instructors cannot exercise control over all areas mentioned in Lock’s proposals, there are undoubtedly aspects that educators control. The virtual environment, for instance, offers one such aspect that can be uniquely tailored to enhance community. As Uvalic-Trumbic and Daniel (n.d.) note,

Although they have great potential, virtual learning environments are often not used as innovatively as they might be. Designers of online learning must select the components of the virtual learning environment carefully, bearing in mind the needs and life situations of the students (p. 9).

This is one area (if not one of many) where online education may do well to look to the gaming industry for inspiration (see McGonigal, 2011). At any rate, the text-based format of online coursework privileges those with high levels of technological literacy; engaging students in ways that enable them to familiarize themselves with the technological aspects

that will be involved in the coursework - initially in a low-stakes environment - yields a stronger sense of social presence, as students who are more actively involved in the course report higher perceptions of presence (Tu and McIsaac, p. 135).

The instructional design of any online course provides another area for community-building innovation. Just as the unique potential for collaboration is a defining feature of online education, the design of our courses should be inherently collaborative and transparent in its expectations and purpose. If possible, small groups are preferable to whole group setups, as investment and interaction is increased in more intimate settings (Uvalic-Trumbic and Daniel, n.d.).

The discussion forum has often operated as a sort of catch-all for community building and social interaction. However, Tu and McIssac (2002) remind us that we have got to move beyond dry, task-oriented discussions, for “[w]hen the conversation is task oriented and more public, the degree of social presence will degrade” (p. 134).

Though online students recognize the important role they play in creating and maintaining a positive community, in Conrad’s (2005) longitudinal study of an online student cohort, by the end of the program, students had clear ideas about the role of the instructor in creating an online community:

Simply put, learners said, ‘Good instructors created community; poor instructors didn’t.’ These learners defined good instructors as present, prompt, energetic, responsive, and knowledgeable. Good instructors gave appropriate feedback and demonstrated a level of passion for their teaching and their subject. Experienced online learners were able to identify and label poor instruction; they felt that the strength of their community permitted them to survive poor instruction (p. 12).

The emergence of “underground communities” that exist among students, in spite of poor instruction, is a testament to the necessity of community in online learning. As such, professional development is just as crucial for online instructors as it is for face-to-face instructors (and demonstrated skill in one mode of teaching does not mean skill in *all* modes of teaching!). Heuer and King (2004) offer sage advice to novice online instructors: “[F]acilitating online learning is like any other situation where you work with human beings. It is important to share your warmth, to be curious about who your students are and how they think, to set a clear course, to provide encouragement, to be there.” As part of sharing their lives and personalities with students, the importance of dedicated time for introductions among instructors and learners cannot be overstated. Tu and McIsaac (2002)

analyzed conversations in online courses and noted that interactions were more informal among senders and recipients who were more familiar with one another, which enabled the sharing of more personal information, which in turn increased the level of perceived social presence for both parties.

Based on this finding, Tu and McIsaac suggest that online communication should be stimulating, expressive, full of feelings and emotions, meaningful, and easily understood (p. 143). However, because the delivery channels for communication are rather narrow, misunderstandings among individuals are bound to occur. Still, these occurrences only further underscore the need to create opportunities early on for students to get to know one another and the instructor.

Feedback response time is another critical factor in building community, especially in asynchronous courses. When users did not receive a response within an expected timeframe, or did not receive one at all, they perceived less social presence (Tu and McIsaac, 2002). Feedback from instructor helps to decrease retention as it promotes a sense of belonging, and for this reason, even in asynchronous courses, every effort should be made to provide timely feedback to students in a warm, caring tone (O'Brien and Renner, 2002).

Implications for Our Work

In this relatively limited space, the importance of online learning communities has only been touched upon; to wit, much more research must be done before we can clearly articulate the myriad ways community and relationship-building can potentially benefit our learners. But with this renewed focus upon interpersonal relationships in cyberspace, Lock (2007) advises stakeholders at all levels of online education to "accept new responsibilities and new roles" (p. 146). Though these new roles may be daunting for all involved, the unique collaboration that is to be found in online courses, among people from various parts of the world and at different places in their lives, are an important form of boundary crossing that offer unparalleled opportunities for meaning generation. Thus our work - collaborative, creative, and uncharted- is absolutely vital.

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